

Recorded Interview with Jan “Pogo” Robison

Date: 7/26/2010

Location: Depoe Bay, Oregon

Interviewer: Christina Package

CP: How did you get into fishing and into the fishing industry?

JR: I grew up in Depoe Bay and my dad had a charter fishing business. We started fishing when we were really young. I was 5 or 6 years old when I started. I would go out with my dad. We had row boats in the bay and we fished all over, all around the bay. We fished crab and ocean salmon in our little fishing boats. I grew up in the fishing business. My dad had a charter fishing business, so as we got older we got to work on the boats and just got involved in it and stuck with it for a long time. We had a really good time growing up and got to do a lot of stuff, you know. When I was 8 or 9 years old our dad would turn us loose with a 40 foot boat and sent us out by ourselves, you know [laugh]. Not many young children had that experience or had that weight on them, but he trusted us running the boat in the bay and stuff. Many times coming in the channel, he would turn the wheel over and say ‘Here, you drive’ [laugh]. It would scare you to death, but eventually you would get enough courage to do it. Depoe Bay is a kind of narrow place, but it was really a lot of fun. That was how we got started in the fishing business.

CP: Are you still fishing now?

JR: No, I quit about 15 years ago. Just because I spent enough time up in Alaska fishing and I just wanted to be home. It was time for a change. There is more to life than living on a boat, you know [laugh]. I thought I would try land for a while. That’s kinda where I am now here. I still have a small boat for playing around, but I just don’t have the desire to go out and spend my entire life out there [laugh]...

CP: How did you get started in Alaska and what you primarily fished up there?

JR: Well, first I was drafted in the service. I was the last draftee out of this county and was living in Virginia when I got out of the service and I called my brother, who at the time was crabbing up in Alaska around King Island, and he said ‘I just made \$10,000 this week’. I was making \$3,000 a year, so it was really a no brainer to me where I was headed. When I got out of the service in 1974, and had done a little salmon fishing in 1975, my brother asked if I would go up to Alaska and get a job King crabbing. So, I went up. I had \$300 in the bank and went up there to work. I crashed on the couches of friends I knew who were living up there and I worked at a

Chinook cannery for a while. My brother was fishing on the Buccaneer and it was about 6 months old at that time. I got a job King crabbing [half share?] and that boat ended up being the second most successful boat that year. We pulled in 450,000 pounds of King crab that year. I earned like \$17,000 dollars, and I hadn't ever seen money like that. Never in my life. I just said, all right. It was a lot of hard work, but the money was good.

After that I tanner crab fished that winter and got a boat working on the King and Wing, which was run by Wilburn Hall [laugh]. Billy Williams was the skipper. He was really a great guy to be at sea with. When he hit the beach he was a wild and crazy individual. But, he was a really good sailor and fisherman. We made really good money working for him, but I guess at that juncture in my life the money wasn't really such a driving force. It was the fun of catching crab that was the driver. It was just fun filling the boat up. I just really enjoyed what I was doing. The money was kind of a secondary thing I guess. But, we had a really good time. I learned a lot to. This guy Billy was a good navigator and really sharp with engines. He wasn't a yeller or screamer. He was just a great guy to sail with. I mean a really good guy to sail with. Really sharp. I stayed on that boat for 2 or 3 years with him and that was my home. I would leave here [Depoe Bay] in mid August and wouldn't come back until the middle of May. That was my home living on that boat. It was a 110 foot wooden schooner and it was an amazing boat to live on. It used to be a pilot boat from 1932 to 1957 and it had all hard wood oak and cherry. It was beautiful. You would go down in there and it was like climbing inside an alpine chalet with nice, bright, and shiny mahogany.

CP: Is that boat still around?

JR: No, that boat sunk about 15 years ago around St. Paul and St. George. It's really a shame. It should have been a museum piece. It had a terrific amount of history in Alaska. It pulled a lot of bodies off the Prince of Sofia when it crashed. The King and Wing rescued several crews. It had quite a history to it.

So, I went then to work on the Progress, another boat that Mr. Hall owns. My older brother Bennie was running it. I king crab fished with him and fished up in the Bearing Sea and then we went summer fishing up in St. Mathews Islands for Blue crab. That was an interesting experience up there. It was fun. We caught a couple crab up there. After that it was about the time that the king crab crashed, when the quota when from 120 million down to 15 million, so the boat went into the joint venturing fishery. So we set out doing that and of course, we were all crabbers and none of us knew anything about dragging a net around the ocean. It was a real learning experience for us. The boat had the drag gear on it, but it was totally inadequate for the size of nets we were pulling. So we came down to the ship yard and did a total retrofit on the boat. New winches. A new hydraulic system. That got us going on the joint venture fishing thing and we stayed with that for quite a few years.

CP: Was that joint venture for Pollock?

JR: Yeah. We did that. Then I took six months off and built a house in Depoe Bay. I got done with that and then I became a release skipper on another boat of Mr. Hall's and worked on that for a while. Then I ended up going back and working for my brother. That was good money. We were making some really long trips. I think one trip was 135 days or something. We had one period there were out of 6 months, we weren't getting a lot of time on the beach. That was about the time that I said, there has got to be more to this [laugh]. That's a long time to be floating around. I really enjoyed doing, but after a while I just didn't have the desire to be out there anymore. I quit. I did some summer salmon fishing after that. I had a 30 foot trawler. That was a tax right off.

We had some wild times up there. It was pretty wild west up there in Kodiak.

CP: What was it like?

JR: It was really crazy. One bar, the B&B was a place we went a lot. It was a real dirt bag of a bar. You would go in there and everybody had money, so everybody was buying everybody drinks. People buying 12 rounds of whiskey, you know [laugh]. First, you got young kids with lots of money and no place to spend it. I was right there participating with the best of them. It was a little interesting. There wasn't a lot of recreation around Kodiak at that time. I saw a lot of people spend money foolishly on things that really weren't too legal and unfortunately they lost their way. Some guys wouldn't pay their taxes and the IRS would come down on them and all of a sudden they wouldn't have enough money to buy a pair of boats, you know. You gotta pay your taxes. People had been doing that for years. I was fortunate enough to pay my taxes and I saved money. I saved enough to buy things of value, like property. I was fortunate in that respect. You always hear the thing were guys chased women and drank and their money went bye-bye. That's kinda the short story of it all.

I saw some incredible weather. Really big seas. I remember this one night where it was 100 knouts and 40 foot seas. I was on boats that were fortunate. It's scary, when you think about it. So many people that started King crabbing were doing it with shrimp boats that they got from the Gulf, and they were just not adequate for the fishery. Many of them sunk. One winter I lost 13 people I knew. Cold, icy conditions just wrecked a lot of boats. I guess it was just like the gold rush. People were pushing it back then. Many people started out operating boats with no experience at all. People wanted to get in it. You always hear a lot the stories about the people who made a lot of money, but you never hear anything about the guys who didn't make it or lost their life. I guess that's the way the world goes sometimes. It can be tough at times. I really learned a lot. I ended up running that King and Wing. They turned me loose with it when I was just 27 years old. I ran it and that was quite an adventure for me. The first time you navigate through ice, your eyes get big, let me tell ya. Ice is a real strange thing. It creates real problems for crews. The colder it gets the faster it accumulates. The weight of it just makes everything difficult on the boat. Once we had ice on the boat that was 3 ½ feet thick. It's not sunny cold days up there in the winter. It's dark, bitterly cold, but what an experience. I can say it is easy

sitting back now telling sea stories, but at the time that it the way it is. You just have to learn to deal with it. It is just a day-by-day thing and you better learn to deal with it. That's how it is today.

CP: Could you talk more about Kodiak?

JR: When I was there, there was probably only 3 miles of paved road. Everything was all gravel roads. It was pretty rugged. All the cars had dents and dings in them. Of course, I was usually only there in the Fall and Winter time, so it was rainy, icy, snowy, and just pretty ugly. That town gets muddy and dirty in the cold months. When you go visit somebody in their house, the first thing you do is take your shoes off. The food supplies in restaurants would be a problem. The bar scene of course was going strong then. Not much else to do. There were about 4 or 5 bars and always that going on. Kodiak certainly wasn't laid back, it was a Wild West type thing. There were a lot of fights and this and that.

CP: What was the wildest thing you experienced up in Kodiak?

JR: I remember this one time when the bartender at one of the bars put psychedelic mushrooms in the coffee filter and made everyone in the bar mushroom tea. That got everyone cooking pretty good. This girl started dancing on the bar with her top off. That was pretty crazy. Kodiak was an interesting place. When my brother was up there, there was a boat that was beached that was made into a bar. It was a bar that had a lot of wild stories. It was a good sized ship. It was maybe 200 feet long. There were rooms for rent, so you can just imagine what all went on there. That was before I got up there, so I guess I missed out on that [laugh].

There was a lot of people from this area up there. The Painters and the Halls and other guys from Newport and the Waldport area. A lot of people from Lincoln County went up there.

CP: Why do you think so many people from here got involved?

JR: Well, at that time the salmon fishery had slowed down. It wasn't really happening here. It was really a gold rush fever thing. That was why people got involved. When the price of crab went up, people really started flooding up there.

CP: Did the fisherman who went up there interact with the townspeople?

JR: Oh yeah. We would make friends with folks up there. It's a small community, so you meet a lot of people. The crab fisherman and the salmon fisherman who went up there in different cycles contributed to their economy. They like us for that. Local people were really nice to us. It was always interesting to talk to people who were there in 1964 when the tidal wave hit. The Painters, from Depoe Bay, were fishing up there at the time. Not the day of, but shortly after, and it really devastated that place. It changed the landscape all over the coast of Alaska.

CP: Could you talk more about the joint venture fishery you were involved with?

JR: We were involved with a Japanese venture. I can't remember how many processing ships they had, but it was quite a few. That was really interesting. I think at that time we were delivering about 30 to 40 cod to them. Dealing with another nation and everything was really interesting. It was a real learning curve. I really learned to respect those people because they were really good sailors. They had been catching fish with nets for a long time. We were just starting to get things figured out. They were superb seaman. They were really helpful to us. They took a lot of fish. I had one day when I delivered 700 metric tons myself. That was just one boat. 700 metric tons. One time in the Bearing Sea, in the 1980s, there was about seven or eight nations involved in the Pollock fishery. Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Russian, Koreans, and Chinese ships. It was just incredible to see how many fish were being caught. The Japanese were really good. They didn't waste anything. The Koreans would waste a lot. They would strip the eggs out of the fish and throw it over. The Russians did that to. We delivered several times to the Russians and that was a huge ship and everything, but really slow in getting the fish processed. The Russians were slow. It was always interesting to see a Russian ship show up in Depoe Bay. Those Russian ships were pretty scrappy. They didn't spend a lot of money on scrubbing them off, that's for sure. In the late 1960s we had a fleet of Russians fishing off the Oregon coast here. They like Playboy magazines, that's for sure [laugh]. It was interesting, because while our governments didn't see eye-to-eye, they were just like us, out there trying to make a living.

CP: Did you stop fishing Pollock after the joint venture?

JR: I fished salmon in Bristol Bay after the joint venture in the summer. I did that with a friend for 10 years. The salmon fishing up there is crazy. Boats crashing into each other. It was just nuts. I had a friend who had a beautiful new boat and after a season up there it had dents and holes in it. It looked like it was fifty years old. You gotta fish line and you can't go over the line or you get a ticket. So everybody is trying stay on this line and people are just running by ya at full speed. People are setting gear and running into each other. That was insane. Those openers would be nuts. At one time they would charter planes to spot the fish and after a couple plane crashes, that got regulated.

There isn't a Kodiak King crab fishery anymore, to my knowledge. Now there is just a small boat fishery for tanner crabs. I don't think there is even a shrimp fishery in Kodiak anymore. Shrimp were huge up there. But that's gone. I knew a guy whose boat ended up sinking because of how much shrimp he caught.

CP: Do you think young guys can go up to Alaska and make a living like you did?

JR: They can, but it's getting harder and harder. There are fewer boats now. People who are on boats don't always give up their job that easy. My brother has crewman who have been with him for 20 years. Once in a while though guys will go up and get in on a crew, but it seems that most of the big boats up there have tight crews. They stay right with it. Those guys are still making a

six figure income. I just don't wanna do that anymore. There are not as many jobs, on the whole, as there was then. Boats post job openings. When you make long trips, you have to have a crew that is compatible. When you are spending that much time at sea, you can't hold a grudge the whole time. You need to deal with stuff and with each other. You needed to just roll with the punches.

There are a lot of guys from this county up there.

CP: What was the primary reason to switch from one fishery to another?

JR: Well, when the crab quota went from 120 million to 16 million, so it was just a matter of economics. I made some money halibut fishing, but it's a lot of hard work. Your hands get really sore and tired. The regulations of the halibut fishery changed, went to an IFQ.

CP: Anything you would like to add about your experience fishing in Alaska?

JR: It was just a really good time. I was 22 when I went up there. It was great. I mean what a great experience. It was the gold rush. I had a really good time doing it. Money was an incentive, but more so than that, it was the adventure of doing it. It was interesting and fun. Every day was different. I don't think that will ever happen again in history. Unless there is some resource out there in the ocean that hasn't been tapped into yet, I just don't think that is going to happen again. It was a lot of fun being part of it. The king crab and the joint venture Pollock were both big at the time. I was really fortunate to be there when both were in their primes. I don't think it's gonna happen again.

CP: Were there many women who fished?

JR: They cooked on some boats. Some girls from Kodiak worked out on deck. When I worked the King and Wing, we had one gal working on deck. Susie Wagner is a name that comes to mind. She was up in Kodiak. I really admire those ladies who did it. It was tough. A lot of the guy were just flat out sexist. They just didn't get it at all. My hat goes off to those gals. Those ladies have my respect. It's tough. Not to mention she has guys hitting on her.